

CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

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The Power of a Teacher **Groundbreaking New Contract Takes Effect**



After input from thousands of teachers, and after more than two years of negotiations with the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), last week a groundbreaking new teachers' contract became effective for the DC Public Schools.

For the first time in DC and possibly the country, we will be able to truly reward teachers for a job well done, challenge teachers to reach the next levels of achievement in their craft, better support teachers who need help, and separate teachers who are not effective in the classroom despite these added supports.

What's at Stake

Nearly three years ago while visiting schools in DC, many saw a need for radical changes to a teacher contract that did not enable the school system to recognize or retain our best teachers.

In one of my school visits I observed a fourth-grade teacher in a run-down school building in a high-need DC neighborhood. Considering the challenges that the environment presented for teachers and students

alike, it was one of the most difficult places a teacher could work. Yet when I entered this teacher's classroom I immediately felt a change from the environment that was outside.

The walls were covered in colorful pictures of the Greek gods. Students were reading about a group of children who had traveled in time to ancient Greece, and it was the point in the story for the characters to move forward again in time. The teacher asked the students to find the god that the characters should ask for help.

The room buzzed as children twisted in their seats to scan the walls. I spotted the "god of travel" and waited for them to identify the right answer. Multiple hands shot up as children squirmed in anticipation to share their ideas.

One student chose Zeus, explaining that everyone would have to do what he said. Another chose the goddess of women and families, because she would put the children first. The teacher asked for more.

The next student said, "I would choose the god of music, arts and literature." Oops, I thought. Misfire. I waited for the teacher to correct him, but she waited for him to continue. "In the story, they played the lyre to go back in time. They will need music to come back home."

The teacher continued to probe, encouraging each student to connect knowledge of ancient Greece to the story. She checked for reading comprehension and pushed for textual support while inspiring excitement about reading that would extend beyond the classroom. Eventually, someone suggested my "right" answer, the god of travel.

I left this classroom simultaneously inspired and discouraged. This was clearly a solid teacher. But the odds were stacked against us in keeping teachers like her. At that time, she could not be rewarded for the kind of learning she was creating in her classroom. She would have earned the same paycheck as everyone else, even if her students jumped two grade levels ahead in one year.

With teachers and their union, I believe we have resolved this dilemma in Washington, DC! The new contract will enable us to reward and retain teachers like this one who make an indelible impression on students every day.

Contract Highlights - What will this contract mean for children?

This is a radically different contract than the one we had before, and I believe it will tremendously impact children's lives for the better.

Key Components - Mutual Consent and Increased Accountability

Mutual Consent

Giving principals the authority to staff their schools is one of the most powerful things we can do to advance student achievement. Yet under the last contract, principals were not fully able to staff their schools based on what students needed. We did not have "mutual consent" in our teacher contract, which means that both the teacher and the school must agree for a teacher to work in that school. Here is why it is so important:

If a staff member were let go from a school in the case of a school closing or reconstitution (when staff have to reapply for their jobs, which can happen when a school has not met federal benchmarks for five years in a row), he or she would still be guaranteed a job elsewhere in the system. Principals had little choice about whether to accept the person or not, even if they had other candidates they felt were more qualified.

Few school systems have been able to implement mutual consent to solve this problem, but it is in our new contract! It applies regardless of tenure, and will remove one of the biggest obstacles to improving the school system.

Accountability

Our teachers showed with their vote that they are willing to be held to high standards, and this contract would not have reached them without union leadership that was willing to embrace accountability. They just reasonably want it to be fair. I believe that together, we have created a contract that includes both fairness, and one of the highest standards for accountability in the country.

Teachers will continue to be assessed under a [rigorous performance assessment](#) we implemented last fall. It is enabling us to provide more substantive feedback based on objective assessments and multiple classroom observations. Assessments are not and will not be based on test scores alone, and classroom observations will continue to be administered not only by the principal, but by a master educator in that teacher's subject area.

If teachers have this assessment now, why is the contract needed to ensure accountability?

In the past, when it became necessary to separate a teacher from the system, the process was so litigious and there was so much red tape, that principals did not have the capacity to implement it without a full-time person to keep up with the paperwork! The decisions were sometimes reversed due to a filing error that had little to do with teacher performance. This was incredibly frustrating to hardworking teachers, to principals, and most importantly to children and their families.

Under the new contract, teachers who are ineffective for a full year despite the professional development support, will be separated from the system. This will occur for tenured and non-tenured teachers alike.

Rewarding and Retaining the Best: Teacher Pay

I believe teachers in urban districts have the hardest job in the country, and the contract will enable us to compensate them for doing it well.

Retroactive pay raises across the board

The contract includes a 21.6 percent pay increase over five years, beginning in 2007. This means that DC teachers be among the highest-paid teachers in the country!

For example, first-year high performing teachers currently make \$42,000 per year, and under this contract, they could make around \$70,000 per year. Currently, veteran teachers can make up to \$87,000 per year, and under this contract, the threshold could move to the neighborhood of more than \$140,000 per year. This is not an automatic jump, as the biggest raises will be tied to performance. The highest salaries will go to high performing teachers in the highest need schools and subjects.

Individual Performance Pay

We often hear about performance bonuses being awarded in other professions, and it is time to give teachers the option to receive such incentives and rewards! The new contract establishes a voluntary pay system of individual pay for performance. Teachers must qualify into it, and effective teachers can earn bonuses of up to \$20,000.

This is a huge raise! Where will the money come from?

We have worked with the city's Chief Financial Officer, as well as with private funders, to secure the necessary funding for this contract. Most of the dollars required are designated in the city budget, which is not unusual for a teacher contract. However, the progressive performance pay option is not something most city budgets can afford right now, so this portion of the contract is funded in a different way, with private dollars from foundations committed to innovation in education.

Four foundations signed on to support specific areas of the contract, and we are extremely grateful that they have stepped up in this unprecedented way to support public education in the District of Columbia.

The foundations and their contributions are:

Laura and John Arnold Foundation: \$10 million,
The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation: \$10 million,
Robertson Foundation: \$19.5 million, and
The Walton Family Foundation: \$25 million.

Some have asked whether this means that foundations want to change the curriculum, performance assessments, or the terms of the contract. The answer is no, they don't. Of course, all contributors hope to see a rise in student achievement levels as a result of their generous support, and we believe this is very reasonable.

Is this kind of pay raise sustainable?

Yes. Private dollars only account for a small portion of this contract, and start-up costs will no longer need funding by 2012.

Is it fair to pay teachers more when the city and country are financially strapped?

Yes! In every economy, teachers' influence has gone underestimated and their value unrewarded for—well, forever in this country. This significant raise for teachers is fair, deserved, and too long in coming. Teachers face obstacles that other professionals cannot imagine until they try it. In urban districts the work is even tougher, and I have zero qualms about paying teachers for doing it well.

The Value of a Teacher

Few pursuits are more important than those that occur in a classroom. The well-documented path of this contract negotiation was difficult, and it took almost three years to create a contract with the union that we could all be proud to propose to teachers. With gratitude for the help of a skilled mediator in Howard University's Dean, Kurt Schmoke, I cannot overstate how pleased I am that we have reached this point!

This contract is our honest and best effort to recognize the power of a teacher to shape a life. We are thrilled that, by a significant majority, teachers have accepted the rewards and the challenges it will present, and we look forward to seeing the benefits it will reap in students' lives.

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